



YOUNG AND WISE SERIES 1 (2025)



BACKGROUND



Young and Wise is ARACY's flagship youth consultation platform. It brings the lived experiences of young Australians directly to the policy table.

The platform is built on the landmark Young and Wise Report, which captured the voices of more than 10,000 young people over five years. The Roundtables continue this work with structured, authentic, and impactful dialogue between young people and decision-makers.

In series one, every session - except the Budget and Election Priority Roundtable - was co-designed with the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. Each was built to answer the Department's research questions directly through young people's voices. We ensured diversity, equity, and best-practice facilitation. The Roundtables delivered actionable insights, practical solutions, and closed the loop so young people were informed about how their input is being used by ARACY and the Department.

Young and Wise is more than a consultation. It is a growing community of young voices shaping government and sector priorities. It ensures policy is fit for purpose, inclusive, and future-focused - and it grounds ARACY's advocacy in the lived experiences of young people themselves.

ARACY's Young and Wise Roundtables are supported by the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing under the Health Peak and Advisory Bodies Program.

Send Expressions of Interest for Young and Wise Partnerships to:

ARACY Advocacy Lead, Adam Valvasori

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WHAT DID WE DISCOVER IN SERIES ONE?



The first series of Young and Wise Roundtables took place between March and June 2025. The five consultations revealed that while the topics varied – from social media and mental health to nutrition, alcohol and other drugs, sexual health, and budget priorities – young people kept returning to a set of clear, connected themes.

Across all discussions they asked for:

1. Access & Equity

Cost, location, stigma, and lack of anonymity stop young people from making safe and healthy choices.

2. Curriculum & Wellbeing Education

Improve consistency and quality of wellbeing subjects at school so young people can make informed decisions, recognise risk, and seek support with confidence.

3. Youth Voice & Co-Design

They want a real say in campaigns, services, and policies — and for government to “skip the cringe.”

4. Trust & Confidentiality

Formal supports feel judgmental or generic. Young people need safe, culturally respectful, and confidential pathways to care.

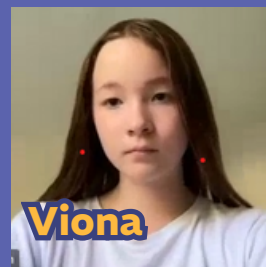
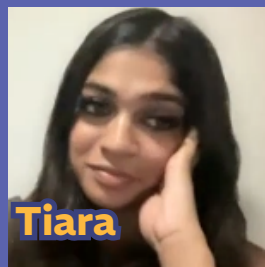
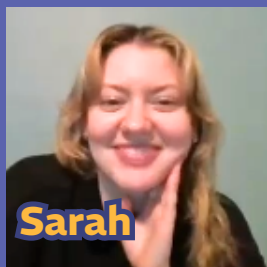
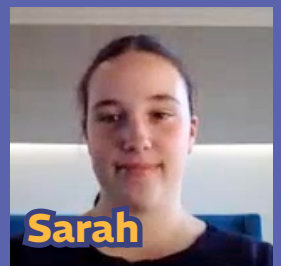
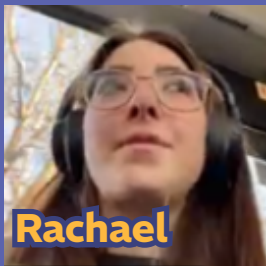
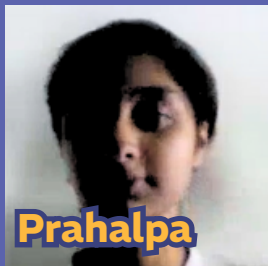
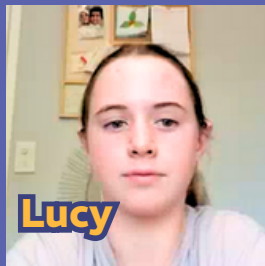
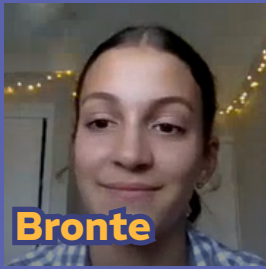
These common strands show the value of ARACY convening Young and Wise Roundtables: we provide a trusted platform that brings lived experience and evidence together, ensuring young people’s voices are not only heard but directly shape the decisions of policymakers.

The below goes into more detail on each of the five Roundtables

We thank the 60+ young people from across Australia and from all walks of life who contributed to these policy roundtables.

(See Appendix for participant characteristics)

Some of our Young and Wise participants from Series 1



SOCIAL MEDIA + MENTAL HEALTH ROUNDTABLE



Policy Insights and Opportunities:

1. What if social media support wasn't ripped away, but replaced with something better?

- **Insight:** Young people rely on social media for peer connection, anonymous support, and real-time mental health advice. The ban risks creating a void without a ready alternative, particularly for those who find formal supports “daunting” or judgmental.
- **Opportunity:** Co-design anonymous, age-appropriate digital platforms that replicate the benefits of social media without the harms. Ensure they provide safe spaces, curated content, and access to peer-led support networks.

2. What if government resources felt human, not faceless?

- **Insight:** Young people don't engage with formal supports like Kids Helpline or Headspace because they feel impersonal, slow, and non-tailored. Young people want connection with others who share lived experience- not “faceless entities.”
- **Opportunity:** Reform youth mental health communications to be intersectional, immediate, and peer-led. Shift from top-down services to co-designed, youth-driven content that reflects real life.

3. What if we didn't make young people wait until 16 to learn how to use social media?

- **Insight:** Many young people feel their schools don't adequately prepare them for online life. When social media is finally allowed at 16, they're unprepared- “like handing over a car without any driving lessons.”
- **Opportunity:** Introduce mandatory, age-appropriate media literacy in early secondary school, focusing on emotional regulation, healthy boundaries, and positive online engagement before access is granted.

4. What if wellbeing was the metric for digital policy?

- **Insight:** While some welcomed reduced exposure to toxic content, others worried the ban would increase isolation—especially among disabled, LGBTQIA+, and rural youth who rely on online spaces to connect and feel seen.
- **Opportunity:** Evaluate digital policy against wellbeing indicators, not just risk. Prioritise social connection, identity, and safe expression for marginalised groups when regulating digital environments.

5. What if being “offline” didn’t mean being alone?

- **Insight:** Young people said alternative ways to connect – like in-person events, group chats, or Zoom spaces – were needed to avoid loneliness and loss of community. They fear a “jarring” disconnect.
- **Opportunity:** Invest in safe, fun, and accessible offline and hybrid opportunities for youth to connect. Focus on cost, transport, and sensory-friendly designs to reduce barriers to participation.

6. What if we taught kids to drive the internet, not fear it?

- **Insight:** Many young people didn’t want to ban social media outright –they wanted to learn how to use it well. “There are benefits... but how can we access them responsibly?”
- **Opportunity:** Develop balanced education that teaches digital resilience, respectful engagement, and critical thinking. Empower young people with tools to self-regulate and use social media for good.

A word from someone who’d know...

“I think mandatory school programs would be really helpful – like the other health sessions we already have through Education Queensland. If young people can’t use social media until they’re 16, and they’re still at school at that age, it just makes sense to use that time to teach them how to use social media responsibly. That way, when they do get access, they’ll understand both the positives and the negatives –like, oh, doom scrolling might not be good –and know what they’re getting themselves into.”

Bronte, 15, Queensland



ALCOHOL & OTHER DRUGS ROUNDTABLE



Policy Insights and Opportunities:

1. Not Just for Parties: Alcohol as a Coping Mechanism

- **Insight:** While alcohol is often a social and enjoyable part of life for many young people, participants also described a parallel reality - where alcohol is used to cope with stress, mental health challenges, or trauma.
- **Opportunity:** Investment in preventative mental health promotion campaigns provide off-ramps from Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) as a mental health support and on-ramps to accessible, anonymous online support on the path to more formal IRL supports if necessary.

2. Risk? What Risk?

- **Insight:** Alcohol use is often normalised and downplayed -especially by parents, peers, and on social media - leading many young people to start drinking earlier and use humour to minimise its risks.
- **Insight:** In relation to other drugs, young people link drug use to mental health, belonging, and curiosity, with shifting perceptions - marijuana is often seen as safer than cigarettes or vapes, though tighter laws have made some more cautious.
- **Opportunity:** Co-design in preventative health promotions that target parental behaviour, e.g. DrinkWise TVCs, and peer-led communication campaigns informing on real risks.

3. Where Are They Getting It?

- **Insight:** Young people said they most commonly access alcohol and substances through parents, siblings, and friends, while online purchases are rare due to perceived risk, with some discreetly sharing Instagram accounts of people they know can buy AOD for them.
- **Opportunity:** Target parental behaviour. Make parents aware that their children might be accessing AOD through third parties met through social media.

4. Advertising: Too Much Glam, Not Enough Grit

- **Insight:** While alcohol ads are widespread and government campaigns are seen as generic and ineffective, anti-vaping ads with relatable young people and stories and emotional impact resonated strongly.
- **Opportunity:** Invest in similar style ads for alcohol. Partner with young people to co-design health promotion messages that work? Let's save you time and money on 'cringe content'.

5. Zero-Alcohol Products: A Quiet Shift

- **Insight:** Non-alcoholic drinks are seen as helpful for social inclusion and sobriety or moderation, with cost a barrier- but less so than full-strength alcohol.
- **Opportunity:** Research short and long term policy implications for the rise in popularity. Are there negatives such as 'grooming' for alcohol consumption or will zero-alcohol, alcohol brands become a new norm?

6. Barriers to Support

- **Insight:** Most young people prefer support from friends, teachers, or online sources over professional help, citing confidentiality and access issues, with little awareness of national services like Path2Help or the AOD Hotline.
- **Opportunities:** Medicare Mental Health page updated to be easier to engage young people with AOD concerns. Framing update to recognise Mental Health can also cause AOD problems. Ensure easy safety exits and emergency help links e.g. YSAS. Amplify the real reasons some young people are refusing AOD? Or would that have the opposite effect? Co-design is key.

A word from someone who'd know...

"I've been to a public and a private school and I found that at the public school we had presentations come in and they were just either really repetitive or that would treating us like we're really little. Like one of them was like a musical about it, and it's just we were all like 15-16. We just thought it was like a bit boring and had better things to do.

And then at my new school, we had this guy, I think his name's Paul Dillon came in and he was much better. He was like: 'I know people are gonna be doing these things already. So here's how to do it safely. And here's how to talk about it.

Not just: 'Don't do it because people are already doing'"

Leo, 18, South Australia



NUTRITION ROUNDTABLE



Policy Insights and Opportunities:

1. What if imperfect produce was delivered straight to young people at a discount?

- **Insight:** Cost is the biggest barrier to young people accessing fresh food. Participants want governments' help to make healthy options realistically affordable via subsidies.
- **Opportunity:** Incentivise and partner with supermarkets and green grocers to promote and discount "ugly" produce for young people and their families. E.g. The Odd Bunch (Woolworths), Imperfect Picks (Harris Farm Markets), I'm Perfect (Coles) via schools, co-ops, youth orgs, or mobile apps. Solves two problems with one strategy.

2. What if every student graduated knowing how to cook three healthy meals?

- **Insight:** Young people know what's healthy - but some of our participants said they don't know how to prepare it and backed investment in this solution.
- **Opportunity:** Support states to embed practical cooking skills in the curriculum, throughout high school. Include judgement-free nutritional education within these programs (e.g. different ways to cook vegetables). Lunch time cooking classes. Online Health Promotion campaigns targeting 18–24-year-olds with cooking tips could also be deployed – great universal health prevention strategy. Could also extend this to sponsoring free cooking classes at universities that incorporate vital nutrition information.

3. What if we treated school meals as a health intervention, not just lunch?

- **Insight:** Many participants skipped meals due to cost of food, body image, and/or ability of their family to prepare a school lunch for them.
- **Opportunity:** Explore subsidised school lunch programs. Use non-judgemental language around food, and employ this in a nutritional information campaign targeted to parents. Improve mental health literacy and give students tools to better manage body image/ mental health barriers. i.e. via proactive wellbeing education and primary health interventions

4. What if nutrition labels actually made sense to young people?

- **Insight:** Most participants had seen the Health Star Rating, but few understood it – and some didn't trust it.
- **Opportunity:** Co-design youth-friendly Health Star rating explainer content or graphics with young people. Invest in youth-targeted social media and/or curriculum education campaigns.

A word from someone who'd know...

"I feel like there's a big difference between our generation and the generation before us.

Like I feel like back, then not to generalise it too much, but families had more time to teach the kids how to cook, how to take over themselves.... All those things. Like nowadays some kids can't really cook for themselves and I feel like compulsory cooking is something that should be taught. Cause like yes, we have a lot of theoretical stuff. Yes, I know how to eat healthy. Yes, I know how to do that? But if I have a capsicum and I don't know how to cook with it, why would I first of all buy it and then have it in my counter and just have it thrown away later?"

Christopher, 18, Queensland



SEX EDUCATION + CONTRACEPTION ROUNDTABLE



Policy Insights and Opportunities:

1. What if sexual health education truly included everyone?

- **Insight:** Young people noted that existing sex education rarely addresses diverse needs, particularly for LGBTIQ+ students or those requiring alternatives such as latex-free contraception. This exclusion leaves many feeling unseen and unsupported.
- **Opportunity:** Embed inclusive, tailored sexual health content across all schools nationally, ensuring that resources reflect diverse identities, bodies, and needs.

2. What if schools were safe spaces for those with lived experience of sexual violence?

- **Insight:** Participants raised concerns that schools and staff are not always equipped to respond safely to disclosures of sexual violence, which can retraumatise students seeking support.
- **Opportunity:** Invest in trauma-informed training and whole-of-school approaches that provide safe, supportive environments for students with lived experiences of violence.

3. What if digital tools reflected young people's realities?

- **Insight:** Young people are increasingly turning to digital platforms for sexual health information, but many tools fail to reflect their realities or engage them in design.
- **Opportunity:** Co-design digital sexual health tools with young people to ensure they are safe, relevant, inclusive, and reflective of lived experience.

4. What if confidentiality was guaranteed when seeking care?

- **Insight:** Concerns about confidentiality and judgement remain a barrier for young people accessing contraception and care, particularly in smaller and/or rural communities.
- **Opportunity:** Strengthen protections for confidentiality in health and education settings, supported by awareness campaigns that reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking.

5. What if sex education was consistent no matter where you lived or studied?

- **Insight:** Experiences of sex education vary significantly depending on state policy, school type, or even individual teachers, leading to inequities and, in some cases, harm.
- **Opportunity:** Establish nationally consistent, mandatory sex education standards to ensure every young person, regardless of postcode or school type, receives accurate and inclusive information.

6. What if trusted information could outpace misinformation?

- **Insight:** While social media is a key source of knowledge, it is also a space where misinformation spreads quickly. Young people want better information without losing peer-to-peer learning.
- **Opportunity:** Develop accessible, trauma-informed online platforms that provide evidence-based information while validating youth-led knowledge sharing.

A word from someone who'd know...

"it's not just that [formal sex education] is bad, but it's actively doing harm."

Jay, 19, Western Australia



YOUTH BUDGET PRIORITIES ROUNDTABLE



Policy Insights and Opportunities:

1. What if mental healthcare was fast, affordable, and available to all young people - not just some?

- **Insight:** Young people consistently identified mental health as their top budget priority. Many shared frustration with the cost of care, long wait times, and the limits of the 10 subsidised sessions under Medicare. Access was especially difficult for young people from multicultural backgrounds, rural areas, or without private health cover.
- **Opportunity:** Expand Medicare to cover 20+ fully subsidised mental health sessions annually and ensure equitable access for all young people, regardless of background or visa status.

2. What if young people didn't have to choose between food, rent, and getting to school?

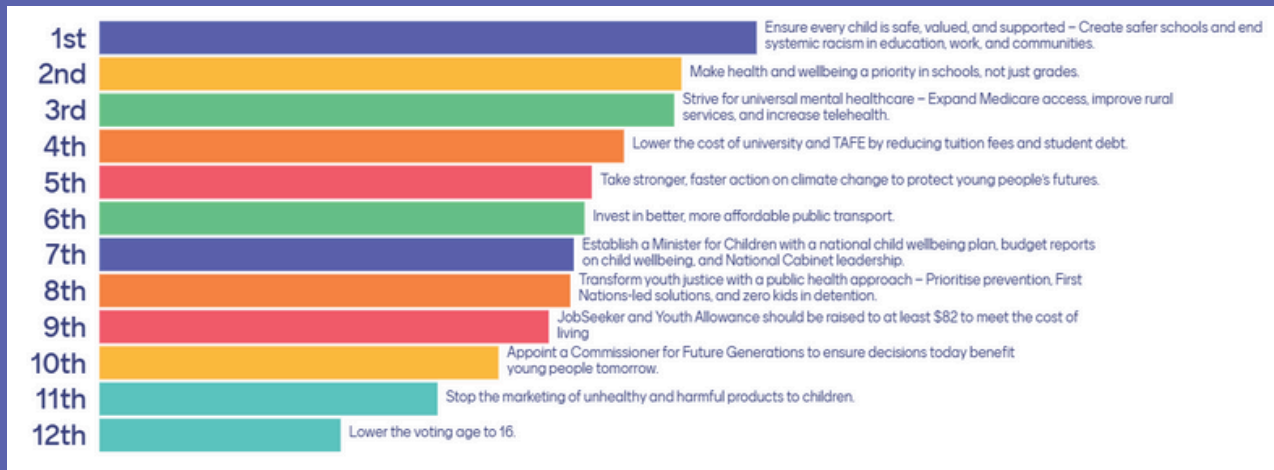
- **Insight:** Cost-of-living pressures were the most consistently raised concern, with housing stress, student debt, grocery bills, and unaffordable public transport all cited as barriers to wellbeing and education.
- **Opportunity:** Invest in youth-specific cost-of-living supports — including rental assistance, HECS relief, free public transport for students, and food security programs.

3. What if schools were judged by how well they supported wellbeing, not just grades?

- **Insight:** Young people called for a national shift toward wellbeing-led education. Students want schools to offer mental health support, body image programs, and inclusive environments for all identities and learning needs — not just focus on academic results.
- **Opportunity:** Fund a nationally consistent wellbeing curriculum, with teacher training and inclusive programs that support diverse learners and mental health in every school.

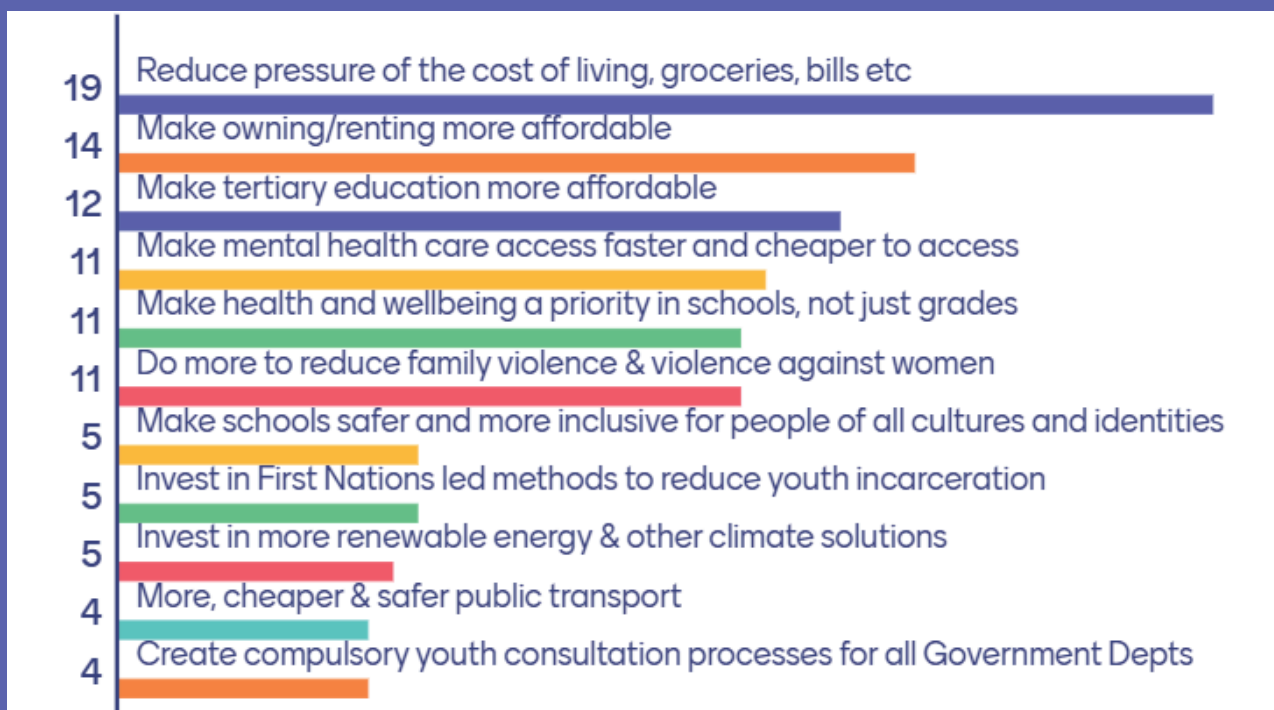
BUDGET 2025/26

We asked our Young and Wise members to rank some of the things that ARACY advocates for, from most to least important to them. Here are their responses:



n= 23 Pre-Budget Survey

This is a summary of how the 13 Young and Wise Treasurers in one Roundtable chose to distribute \$100 billion.



Post Budget Young and Wise Roundtable n=13

4. What if youth voices shaped every major policy decision?

- **Insight:** Participants expressed deep frustration at being sidelined in decision-making — particularly in policies that affect them. They supported compulsory youth consultation and structural reform like a Future Generations Commissioner to ensure long-term thinking.
- **Opportunity:** Embed youth co-design across all federal policymaking and legislate a Commissioner for Future Generations to champion intergenerational fairness and accountability.

5. What if Australia's investment priorities truly reflected what young people care about?

- **Insight:** Young people overwhelmingly deprioritised military spending and instead called for public investment in health, housing, education, and climate action. Many felt Australia's budget settings were out of step with their lived realities and future needs.
- **Opportunity:** Align federal budget priorities with the values of young Australians by redirecting investments toward social infrastructure that improves wellbeing and resilience.

A word from someone who'd know...

"I'm in leadership this year as the wellbeing school captain... I know a lot of people in my school, especially females, are struggling with body image and eating disorders. It's been a real big issue... I just think it's a really broad thing that can be put into so much — like budgeting for healthcare and stuff."

Paris, 18, Victoria

CONCLUSION

The first series of Young and Wise Roundtables has shown the power of creating space for young Australians to speak directly to the issues that shape their lives. Across diverse topics - from social media to nutrition, alcohol and other drugs, sexual health, and federal budget priorities - young people consistently called for fairness, honesty, and inclusion in the systems around them. They want education that is practical, services that are safe and confidential, opportunities to co-design what affects them, and policy that puts wellbeing at the centre of national priorities.

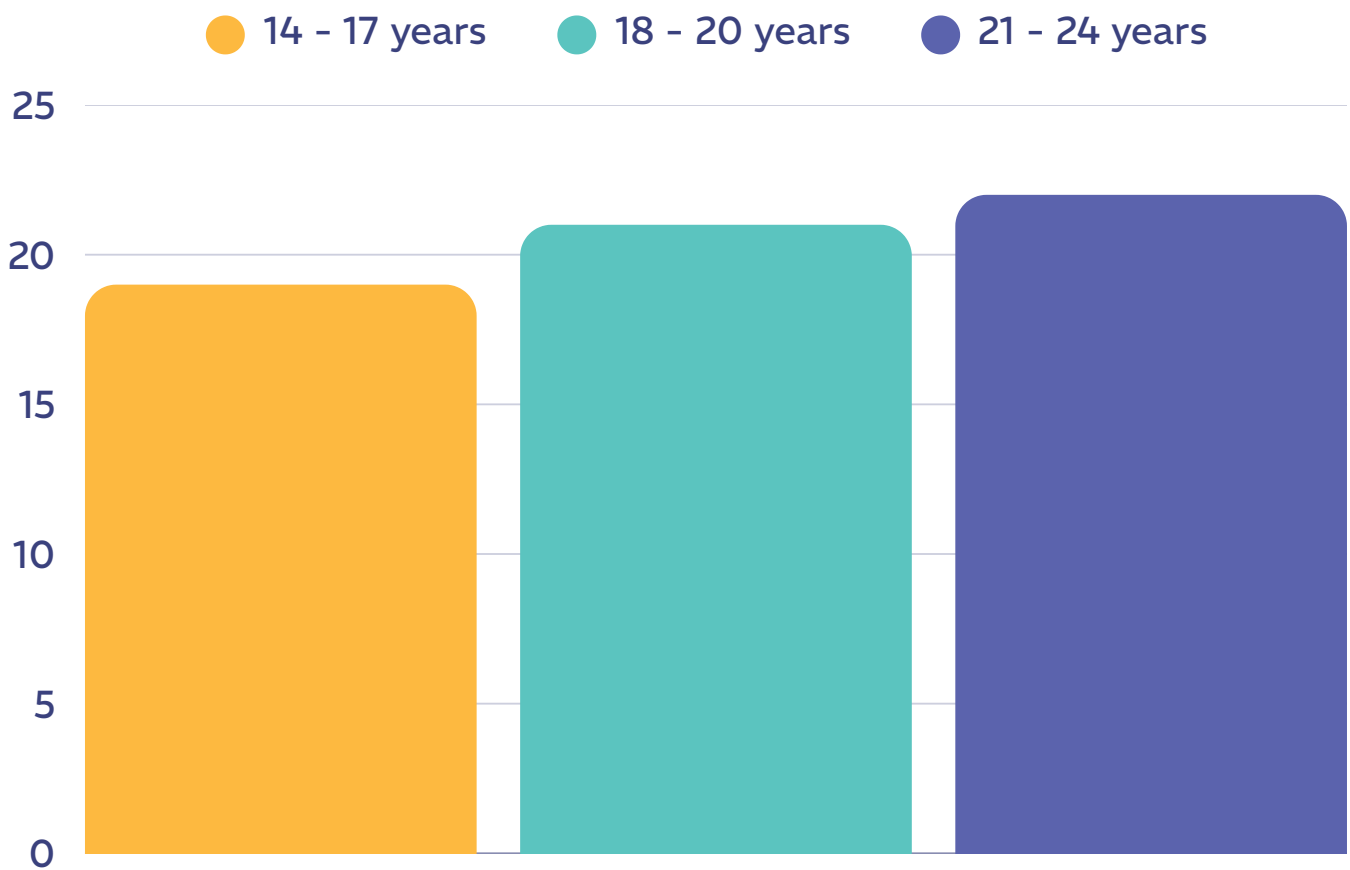
These insights are not just reflections of the present; they are practical pathways for our policymakers to co-create a better future. By partnering with ARACY, governments and organisations gain access to a trusted, evidence-based process that translates lived experience into actionable policy opportunities. The message from young people is clear: involve us, respect our voices, and act on what we say.

The task now is to ensure these voices don't just echo within roundtables but resonate in Cabinet rooms, classrooms, and communities across Australia. ARACY's Young and Wise initiative stands ready to help bridge that gap - so that every decision made for young people is made with them, shaping a healthier, fairer, and wiser Australia for generations to come.

Young and Wise Participant Demographics

Combined across all roundtables: 62 participants

Age Groups

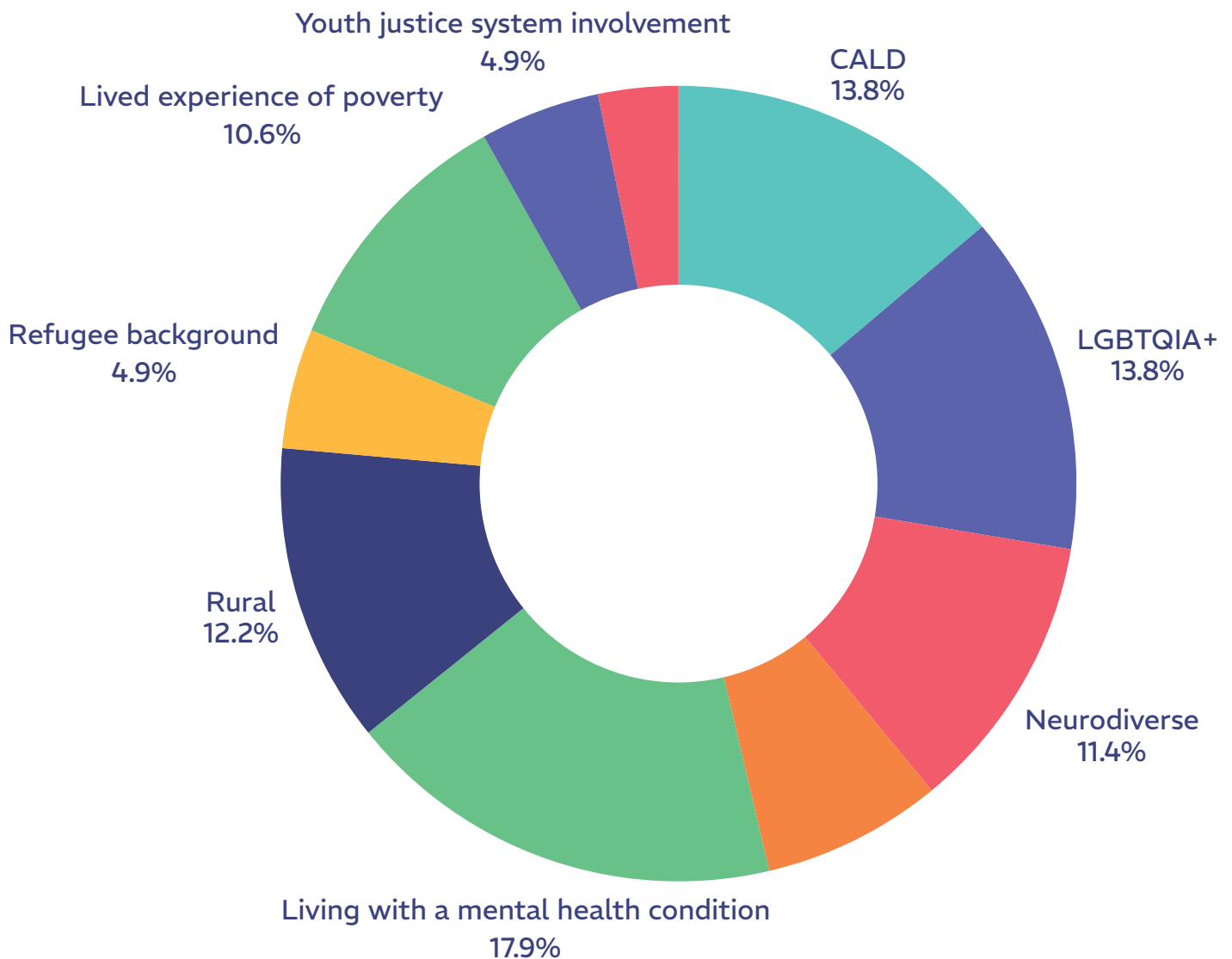


Locations



Lived experience & Identity Characteristics

- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD): 17
- LGBTQIA+: 17
- Neurodiverse: 14
- Living with disability: 9
- Living with a mental health condition: 22
- Rural, regional, or remote backgrounds: 15
- Refugee background: 6
- Lived experience of poverty: 13
- Youth justice system involvement: 6
- Child protection system involvement: 4



Find out more about Young and Wise



Combining **117** reports



Covering **5** years of consultations



Including the voices of over **10,000+** children and young people



Young and Wise

A review of what Australian children and young people say they need to thrive

September 2024



**Feedback from Young and Wise Roundtable Participants
on ARACY's reporting process:**

**I found the report really insightful
regarding all our comments, and I
definitely appreciate the heavy use of
direct quotes rather than paraphrasing**

**I love how you've collated the report.
And thank you again for giving me a
chance to speak.**

**Thank you again for the work you do and
representing our voices**



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